

Sauce for the Gander

By Jack Ritchie

NOTE: A publication copy of this story could not be found in time to be included in this collection.

"I was a model of inefficiency when I was a bride," my wife Meg said proudly. "Jim always said that if there was a new way to ruin a meal, I'd be the first to discover it."

I nodded. "Many a supper I've had to settle for nothing but fried ice cubes."

Claire Wickins, our neighbor, sniffed into her handkerchief. "I'm a great reader of recipes, but something always goes wrong. There are so many things to do all at once and everything has to be finished at the same time."

"Don't panic," I said soothingly. "You've been married only four months and you're bound to learn something, no matter how you try to resist it." I patted her shoulder. "Besides, you're not the worst cook in the world. Last week we had dinner at the Wilbur Larsen's down the street and I haven't stopped trembling yet."

Claire dabbed at her eyes. "If our can opener breaks, Fred will leave me. He's very understanding, but hungry."

A thoughtful glaze came into my wife's eyes. "Has Fred ever, in a moment of typical masculine thoughtlessness, intimated that men are much better cooks than women?"

Claire cogitated a moment. "That was when I roasted the chicken and forgot to take out the insides first. He apologized for days afterward."

"That's it," my wife said brightly. "Goad him into saying something like that again and then push him into the kitchen. Tell him to try to do better. After that experience, he ought to learn to appreciate your miserable cooking."

Claire was uncertain. "But suppose he makes a perfect meal. He's liable to do it

considering that he's an efficiency expert."

My wife thought that over and then smiled. "We'll have to take that chance."

That evening at about seven o'clock, Claire phoned. When Meg hung up she turned to me and grinned. "The evil plan is working. Fred has been conned into making tomorrow night's dinner. We're invited to act as judges."

When I got home from work the next afternoon, Meg and Claire were in our living room wearing their coats.

"Claire and I are going shopping," Meg said. "That'll leave Fred a clear field of operations. We expect to come back with critical appetites."

When they were gone I went next door.

Fred was in the kitchen wearing an apron and a chef's cap. He shrugged unhappily. "I don't know exactly what happened, but here I am. I simply mentioned last night that my love for Claire was as strong as my stomach and the next thing I knew, I was in the kitchen."

He sighed and opened a cookbook. "I know what's expected of me. I'm supposed to be a gigantic failure. It's the only way to restore peace."

He brooded for a few moments. "But I don't know if I can do it. Whenever I start anything at all, an insidious madness strikes me and things turn out right."

He looked at me appealingly. "Suppose you do the cooking, Jim. You're a lawyer and ought to be able to mess things up pretty good."

I shook my head. "I'm afraid not. Everything I touch in the kitchen turns golden brown and delicious. I have a baking powder thumb."

He took a tired breath. "Well, I guess I'd better start. I'll force myself to be incompetent."

I watched him take the roast out of the refrigerator. "My specialty is baking," I said. "When I've got flour on my hands, I'm oblivious to the strain of everyday living. It's a secret vice, of course."

I reached for the flour canister and idly took off the cover. There was something about the flour that caught my attention and I tasted a pinch of it.

"Fred," I said quietly. "Taste this."

He took a pinch and raised his eyebrows. "I'd say this was spiked with salt."

We stared at each other and were struck with the same horrible suspicion. We began tasting various things in the kitchen.

After ten minutes we sat down and considered the enormity of the thing.

"Sabotage," Fred said hoarsely. "They can't even trust us to be failures." He shuddered. "Garlic powder in the shortening. Tabasco sauce in the vinegar."

He pounded his fist on the table. "I refuse to be undermined without prior knowledge. I've got a good mind to unleash the Escoffier in me."

I met his eyes for a moment and then reached for my pen. "I'll make a list of the unadulterated things we need and go to the supermarket."

At six thirty, Fred sat down and mopped his brow. "That does it. Roast tender, succulent brown. Golden glazed potatoes. Happy asparagus ready to be drowned in cheese sauce. I'm beginning to suspect that I'm a genius."

I put a last swirl on my Martha Washington Pie and stepped back in admiration. "If this tastes as good as it looks, the ecstasy will be unbearable."

We sat there, quietly smoking, lost in the glow of achievement, and then slowly the reaction began to set in.

After a while, Jim cleared his throat. "I think we lost our heads."

I nodded unhappily. "Our wives will be tight-lipped for weeks. They'll suffer in

silence every chance they get."

Fred rubbed his frown. "We could hide all this stuff and really whip up something horrible with the stuff they spiked."

I glanced at my watch. "It's too late now. The girls will be back any minute."

We went into deep thought and then I snapped my fingers. "There's just one way out."

Fred nodded soberly. "Wilbur's," he said.

When our wives returned at seven, I whispered into Fred's ear. "Look miserable, tired, and confused. That's what they expect."

Meg's voice was a bit smug. "Did you boys have fun in the kitchen?"

Fred held up a hand. "Please let's not talk about that until I'm stronger."

"The table's all set, girls," I said. "We changed the menu slightly."

A trace of wariness came into their eyes and they looked at each other.

Meg shrugged. "If they start asking questions, give nothing but your name, rank, and serial number."

Their faces brightened when they inspected the soggy fried chicken Fred brought from the kitchen.

Claire tested a drum stick. "Good heavens," she said happily. "This is even worse than I ever made it. It's practically raw inside."

I put the French fried potatoes on the table.

Meg smiled approvingly. "Beautiful. I've never seen any food look so tired."

The meal was brutal, but they ate it with little resentment.

After desert, a dry chocolate cake, Claire clasped her hands. "I've never been so happy. Everything was consistently bad."

Fred nodded. "It wasn't easy." He took her hand. "Dear, never again will I say that I have a strong stomach. The kitchen is yours. Men are lost children among the pots and pans."

Claire was radiant. "Meg and I will clear the table and do the dishes. You two boys run along. I believe it's your bowling night, isn't it?"

We stopped at Wilbur Larsen's house down the street.

He met us at the door and sighed contentedly. "It was delicious. You're lucky my wife wasn't home, though. She may be a terrible cook, but she has her pride. She wouldn't have traded her soggy chicken for

anything you two fools brought over. I'm different. Besides, I was starving."

He unwrapped a cigar. "There's still plenty of food left, boys, and it better be gone before my wife gets back tonight. If she finds any of it, she'll get all kinds of suspicions about who's been here."

Fred and I phoned to arrange for substitutes to bowl in our place, and then we sat down at the kitchen table and helped Wilbur out of his trouble. ♦